

Information for the Press
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DEVELOPING DEWATERED AREAS FOR DUCK HUNTERS

Down through the years we have witnessed a continued decline of natural marshes essential to waterfowl. Millions of acres of natural habitat have been eliminated. In addition, the National economy requires measures being taken for flood control on numerous watersheds. Such developments will eliminate or modify much of the waterfowl habitat now remaining.

The sportsmen have a real interest in the character of these flood control projects as they may be modified or manipulated to serve their interests as well as contribute to the general welfare of the public in terms of flood control, navigation, and power production. Engineering economy has dictated that many tributary streams whose lower reaches are inundated seasonally through impoundment for flood control should be diked off from the main body of the reservoir and drainage or pumping facilities provided to permit some use of the land in addition to the function of flood control as normally required during the winter and spring season. Thus, through construction of dikes, drainage canals, and pumping facilities, hundreds of acres of valuable crop land can still be used for food production and continue their contribution to local economy. The operation of the reservoir permits other uses to be made of these same lands and this is where the duck hunter comes in.

The Fish and Wildlife Service believes that reservoir management should include suitable rest areas for migratory waterfowl, and that portions of the reservoirs be developed as public shooting grounds and be so managed by the State Conservation Department. The success of such a program requires close cooperation between all agencies.

The dewatering units, marginal to the recently completed Kentucky Reservoir, illustrate the point. The normal operation of the reservoir for flood control, navigation, and power production contributes to the natural growth of certain waterfowl food plants. For example, growths of wild millet, smartweed, rice cutgrass, and chufa follow the recession of the water's level. These moist soil plants occur naturally and in fair quantities on abandoned crop lands in the lower reaches of the dewatering units. Their growths are aided by a combination of wet soil and periodic disturbance of the soil as occurs through cultivation for small grains or other crops. This is Nature's contribution. But Nature also contributes undesirable plants which thrive under the same conditions and in time tend to become dominant over waterfowl food plants.

To obtain the greatest use from these dewatering units, the duck hunter must lend a helping hand to Nature's efforts. Natural reseeding cannot be relied upon indefinitely. Seasonal variations in water levels as required in regulation of runoff during flood periods may interfere in some measure with the normal development of the more important food plants. In addition,

wild millet is an annual and cannot successfully withstand competition from perennial plants which propagate by seed as well as sending forth new growth from last year's rootstock. Thus, to assure a full crop of wild millet for wildlife utilization during the hunting season, areas where field examination during the late spring indicates a need for such planting should be seeded each year. The same applies in a lesser degree to the smartweeds. Some of the smartweeds common on reservoir shorelines are annuals while other species important to waterfowl are perennials.

Perhaps the greatest assistance Nature needs is in the control of competitive plant growth such as trumpet vine, buttonbush, and willow. These plants are quick to invade the wet flats which are otherwise highly productive of waterfowl food plants. To discourage such growth and maintain production of desirable vegetation, the area should be disked, preferably each year in the late spring after the water has dropped and the ground dried sufficiently to permit such work. In some instances, disking every second year may be satisfactory. The point to be remembered, however, is that these flats which have a high potential for public shooting grounds must be managed. It is like a farming program. The farmer who harvests a good crop year after year works his land carefully to assure continued production. He prepares the soil and keeps out the weeds. He cannot do the job once and then neglect the field for several seasons, but must work the same ground year after year. And so it must be with the duck hunter who wishes to have the dewatering units offer a good supply of food to attract and hold the birds each fall. These preliminary preparations to a successful duck hunt must be taken care of many weeks before it is time to take the gun off the rack and break open a box of shells.

In the last decade much has happened to change the habits of the ducks as well as the duck hunter. The natural feeding grounds which Nature maintained before the advance of civilization have been eliminated to a large degree. Substitutions such as the dewatering units on the Kentucky Reservoir are available and with proper development and continuous management can be made to serve the interests of a sportsman, as well as contribute to the general welfare of ducks and geese.

Geese are grazers by nature and while they make considerable use of marsh and aquatic vegetation, they are immediately attracted to fields of fall sown grain which provides tender sprouts two to three inches high when they arrive from the North. Thus, to supplement the natural foods, it is becoming a common management practice to provide fields of green forage that attract and hold birds which might otherwise continue their flight southward.

While a considerable volume of natural food can be developed through careful planting and persistent management efforts, the operation of the reservoir for objectives other than waterfowl limits the variety and quantity of natural foods. To supplement this deficiency, it is advisable to utilize some of the crop lands lying adjacent to areas of natural habitat

for growing small grains to be left in the field for use by waterfowl. There are often fields of good quality which, because of water levels, cannot be prepared and seeded during the forepart of the growing season but which could be planted about midsummer to crops that would mature before the first killing frost. Buckwheat and milo are examples of grains suitable for this purpose.

Waterfowl concentrations will be influenced by the location of natural foods and supplemental feeding grounds. Limiting development to a small portion of a hunting area will result in hunting opportunities being limited accordingly. Further, heavy shooting pressure which would likely develop on a small area under intensive management would cause dispersal of the waterfowl to other locations with a result that hunting in general would be rather limited. Thus, the hunting ground to function satisfactorily, from the standpoint of the sportsmen, must be developed and managed to the same degree as adjoining refuge units which afford food and rest areas and generally complement the management of the shooting grounds by assisting in holding waterfowl in the vicinity.